This article is the synthesis of a 72-hour crowdsourced brainstorming exercise in which over 35 Wikistrat analysts from around the world collaboratively explored the implications of China’s growing gender gap. Wikistrat is the first global geopolitical consultancy that collaboratively analyses upcoming political crises.

Summary

Due to China’s gender imbalance – a pervasive problem caused by the country’s one-child policy – the country is set to experience more and more societal difficulties during this century. Given China’s interconnectedness to and importance in the global economic system, any domestic problems hampering China situation will also directly influence the economies of the West. And as for China’s neighbors? Their economic dependence on China certainly means that economic problems in China will affect their economies. With unprecedented numbers of Chinese migrants heading to small neighboring countries on the hunt for brides (and jobs), the influence of the gender imbalance will be greatly magnified.

In China, the current ratio of 117 boys to every 100 girls is leading to a situation in which huge numbers of men will be unable to find a match on the “marriage market.” The situation is likely to become especially dire in China’s rural western areas where a bleak outlook gets bleaker as millions are likely to be unable to marry for a variety of reasons.

In addition to coastal migration (and the associated impacts on rural regions), our analysis will show that a high female suicide rate, increased crime and increased domestic savings are among the particularly important trends to recognize. China’s growing gender imbalance will have political, economic, health-related and social effects.
Political Implications (Internal and Foreign Relations)

The already-destitute living conditions in China’s western rural areas will be made worse by the gender imbalance. As reports show, the migrants who move from inner China to coastal areas are predominantly female, further aggravating the gender imbalance in rural areas. Many of these areas are currently suffering from economic underdevelopment and are already prone to uprisings. Further dissatisfaction with living conditions could fuel future uprisings. Therefore, the gender imbalance is not only a social or economic problem but also a security issue.

In regard to societal peace, studies have shown that unmarried men are more prone to leading an unhealthy lifestyle than married men and that areas dominated by men tend to have high crime rates. Generally, (illegal) prostitution and trafficking of young women both increase. To deal with the problem, China’s policymakers will have to increase the ratio of policemen to civilians in rural areas.

The immigration of foreign brides into China will have further impacts on the development of Chinese society with unclear implications for social peace. The emigration of well-educated Chinese men to destinations abroad to find a wife (and a career) will once again hit rural regions the hardest. A state-run wealth transfer from the economically prosperous coastal areas towards the underdeveloped rural regions is long overdue to preserve social peace – a precondition for China’s continued economic rise.

China’s gender imbalance also has the potential to disturb the country’s relations with its Asian neighbors as both populations will enter a competition over women. The already-mentioned trafficking of young women, male Chinese “marriage tourists” to neighboring states and female immigrants to China searching for a husband are all extremely likely to trigger strong emotional reactions and foster mutual national resentments.

Whether the gender skew will lead to more assertive behavior by China towards its neighbors (especially concerning unresolved territorial disputes) was highly disputed during the brainstorming session. There is a possibility that China will behave more assertively because disputes are often driven by nationalistic resentments.

Economic Implications

In terms of economic performance, studies have revealed that the gender imbalance actually has a positive impact on the economic output of men. Income and monetary security have become important on the “marriage market.” To improve their chances of finding a good match, Chinese men are increasingly pushed to achieve a higher economic status.

The gender imbalance has also led to an increased propensity towards savings, especially among families with only a daughter. Families will have to support their daughters during their education and to ease their marriages with a dowry. The practice of huge savings is increasingly hampering Chinese economic growth because it slows down domestic consumption.

Lastly, China’s policymakers should be aware that there will inevitably be masses of retired males without a family to take care of them in old age. A focus on the establishment of retirement communities is, in our view, an appropriate and effective response. Further, a governmental savings program for unmarried men will be required in order to absorb this group’s most pressing monetary needs. The longstanding social safety net of stable family structures, which has historically taken care of the elderly, will no longer be able to fulfil this task properly.
Health Implications

Health issues such as sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) are likely to become more prevalent. The issue is particularly difficult to address because STDs are a taboo subject of discussion in Chinese society and therefore cannot be combated with public awareness programs as in the West. As noted above, single men tend to lead rather unhealthy lives with poor quality of nutrition and high consumption of alcohol, tobacco and drugs. Stable family structures often prevent this misconduct to a degree, but since these structures are lacking the health of unmarried men will suffer. These combined health problems will cause the Chinese welfare system to suffer increased costs in the coming decades if they are not addressed properly.

Social Implications

One notable characteristic of the “marriage market” is the tendency for well-educated, well-earning men to choose to “marry down,” marrying a wife of lower social status (in regard to education and income). Thus, the “leftover” individuals are “A-level” women and “D-level” men. This has two problematic implications. First, the leftover “D-men” are mostly located in rural areas, aggravating the situation there. Second, the leftover “A-women” are especially in danger of depression and can become prone to suicide – China is the only country in the world in which the suicide rate among women is higher than among men.

Another social effect is that well-off families in the economically prosperous coastal areas will increasingly decide not to have children, a parallel to Western societies that struggle with decreasing birth rates in the upper-income classes. In terms of family structures, the established social safety net will suffer further as more children will grow up without uncles or aunts. In case of family tragedies, it will again be the Chinese welfare system that will have to aid orphans.

CONCLUSIONS

In sum, the gender imbalance in China poses a problem not only to society but also to economics and security as well. It should be a high priority for Chinese policymakers to address this problem and to develop appropriate solutions. If not resolved it will substantially hamper China’s economic performance. Neighboring countries and the West should closely follow developments in China because any large changes in China will affect the world’s economy.